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1995

of
Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

1995 FARM BILL Proposed Conservation Provisions

Conservation Farm Option

PROPOSAL

- The Conservation Farm Option would be a voluntary program for producers who want assurance, for a specific period of time, that they will receive USDA farm program benefits.
- The "selected environmentally sensitive areas" would be determined by USDA in partnership with other federal, state, and local agencies.
- Participating farmers would have to adopt an approved conservation plan that integrates multiple resource concerns.
- Watershed concerns not addressed by the Conservation Farm Option will be addressed in the Coordinated Conservation Assistance initiative.

Coordinated Conservation Assistance

Goals are to improve national and regional guidance to support and assist state and locally developed voluntary conservation efforts using the watershed approach, to offer farmers and ranchers help in whole-farm conservation planning to meet the comprehensive needs of their operations, and simplify the conservation program tool kit that has evolved over the years.

PROPOSAL

- Coordinated conservation assistance would begin with national and regional guidance and standards that reflect national priorities that would be used by USDA agencies to guide and support conservation efforts.
- An open and inclusive process would be used at the state level to

identify priority areas and issues that can be addressed on a watershed or some other geographical basis. Problems and solutions in the watersheds would be identified by local groups. Ultimately the goal would be whole farm conservation plans developed in full cooperation and on a voluntary basis with the producer that work for the farms and ranches in a particular area.

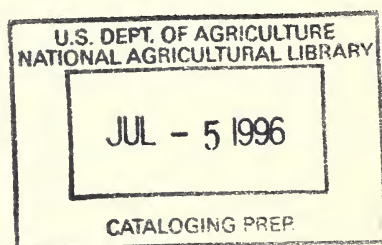
- Simplified financing tools would be established through:
 - A consolidation of existing cost share programs or conservation authorities that would ensure the best elements of each are preserved.
 - A conservation loan authority that would provide low interest, long term loans for high-cost environmental protection measures.
 - A challenge-grant program that would match federal funds with state and local funds.

Highly Erodible Land Conservation

Conservation compliance, a provision of the 1985 Farm Bill and the largest, most ambitious conservation initiative on private lands in history, has been enormously successful. It has resulted in soil erosion declining by about a third on the nation's farmland over the last decade. (see chart) The benefits are evident—cleaner water, improved wildlife habitat, and land protected from damaging wind and water.

PROPOSAL

- Modify the good faith exemption to ensure that it is applied when a good faith violation occurs.
- Modify the graduated payments reduction provision so that the payment reduction is commensurate with the severity of the violation.



Resource Conservation and Development Program

Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) is a regional program initiated and directed at the local level by volunteers. In Hawaii, RC&D programs encompass Kauai, Hawaii, and Maui counties. The RC&D program expires December 31, 1995.

PROPOSAL

- The RC&D program should be extended indefinitely to allow continued use of this popular program to address a host of natural resources, conservation, and community objectives.

Wetland Reserve Program

The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP), established in the 1990 Farm Bill, authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to restore not less than 975,000 acres to wetland status by the year 2000 through permanent or long-term easements.

PROPOSAL

- State and local interests should be encouraged to help establish wetland enrollment priorities and offer matching funds for these priorities.
- The types of land eligible for the WRP should be broadened to include critical environmentally sensitive acres. These would include areas associated with restorable wetlands or riparian zones that are suitable for protection.
- Flexibility should be allowed in timing compensation payments to achieve maximum program efficiency.

Swampbuster

Wetland conservation is one of the most important and sensitive resource issues in our country. The wetland conservation (swampbuster) provision that originated in the 1985 Farm Bill has

successfully helped reduce wetlands losses. However, this provision is controversial and lacks broad support in the farm community. Much of the controversy is caused by the rigidity of the law.

PROPOSAL

- The wetlands conservation (swampbuster) provision should be amended to focus on conserving significant and important wetland functions and values and to increase flexibility so that NRCS can work with farmers in a more common-sense approach, especially with regard to mitigation.
- Change the mitigation provisions so that NRCS and the farmer can focus on enhancing, creating, and restoring significant functions and values on a watershed basis, using sound science and common sense judgment as to the land type, location, and timing of the mitigation activities. The creation and use of wetland mitigation banks is also encouraged.
- Modify the good faith exemption and Graduated Payments Reduction provisions to ensure that a good faith exemption is applied when a good faith violation occurs and the the payment reduction is commensurate with the severity of the violation.

Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative

PROPOSAL

- Establish a Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative within the Department which would coordinate technical, educational, and related assistance programs and help landowners voluntarily enhance their grazing land resources.

Conservation Reserve Program

Through this program, one of the most popular conservation provisions in recent Farm Bills, farmers have retired 36.5 million acres of highly erodible and other environmentally fragile cropland from production and put this land under a soil-conserving cover of grass or trees.

PROPOSAL

- The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) should be reauthorized with USDA granted the authority to modify and extend CRP contracts and to target the program toward more environmentally sensitive areas.
- Beyond 1996, CRP participants would have the opportunity to extend maturing contract. Contract rental rates would reflect the prevailing local market rental rates for comparable land adjusted for environmental and conservation benefits. The extended contract, plus new enrollments, would achieve a Conservation Reserve Program that contains lands most sensitive to erosion, wildlife, water quality, and other high priority values.
- Encourage state and local interests to help establish land enrollment priorities and offer matching funds that realize those priorities.
- Economic use of CRP acres should be permitted under certain circumstances, such as for the production of biomass, in exchange for a reduced rental rate.

National Natural Resources Conservation Foundation

PROPOSAL

- Create a National Natural Resources Conservation Foundation which would:
 - Help promote innovative solutions to conservation problems.
 - Foster partnerships between government and the private sector.
 - Develop the capacity of conservation districts and other local institutions to administer conservation programs.
 - Sponsor demonstrations of effective conservation practices.
 - Identify opportunities for coordinating NRCS-administered conservation programs with similar state initiatives.

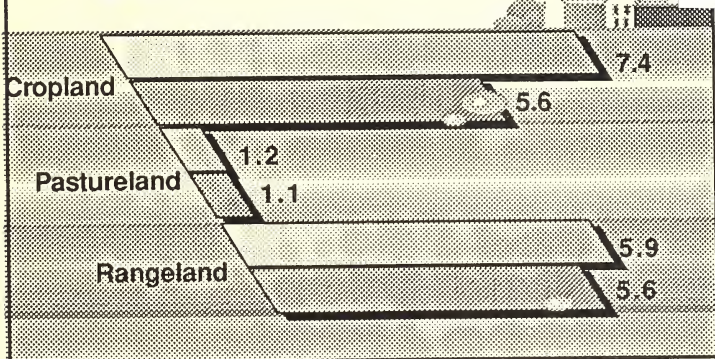


Erosion on nonfederal cropland and grassland—nationwide

Tons/acre/yr

□ 1982

▨ 1992



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The National Resources Inventory

The National Resources Inventory (NRI) is conducted every five years by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The NRI is an inventory of land cover and use, soil erosion, prime farmland, wetlands, and other natural resource characteristics on nonfederal rural land in the U.S. The NRI also provides a record of trends over time. In 1992, over 800,000 sites were used to compile the NRI database.

Sheet and rill erosion on nonfederal cropland and grassland in Hawaii

Tons/acre/yr

